under waterloo's shine (had a dream we were fine)
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by iphigenias

Summary

“I know I’m not the one you want,” Curt had told him once. John had kissed away the awful feeling of those words, had let Curt push him down on his knees the only way that seems to empty John’s head, these days. John had wanted Curt, then. But he’d wanted Buck too. He was in love with Buck; he dreamed of Buck. He never dreamed of Curt at all until he died.

Notes

she's BACK and SADDER THAN EVER! Thank you everyone who has stuck with this series from the start; sorry it's (pun intended) took so long. If you're new here, hello, please read the rest of this series. If you don't want to, alright! This one basically follows the beats of the show, only John and Curt were together since traning until just before Regensberg; John's in love with Buck; Buck knows John's in love with him; how Buck feels about it all is anyone's guess. Title is again from Orville Peck; all characters are based off the Apple TV portrayals of the 100th Bomb Group and no disrespect is intended toward the real men. Find me here.

See the end of the work for more notes

John dreams a lot, in the weeks after Africa. He remembers only fragments upon waking: the sound of Curt's laughter in his ear. The warmth of his hands where they pressed against John's skin, rucked up beneath his skivvies. They fly two more missions before the GRS telegrams with official notice of his death. That whole time John clings to maybe; maybe he'd bailed where the navigators couldn't see. Maybe he'd pulled off another miracle landing, and in a week's time he'd be back at Thorpe Abbotts with those crinkles round his eyes John never got tired of looking at, grinning up at John from beneath his lashes the way he used to when he was angling for a fuck. He brings this up to Buck only once, who looks at John like he's a dog Buck's gotta put down, hands held out in front of him and everything. He's chewing on his damn toothpick and John wants to take it from his mouth and put it in his own mouth. He wants to swallow it whole and prick a wound down the column of his throat and kiss Buck with a mouth full of blood until he understands the hope John has to cling to because if Curt's dead then John will never forgive himself and Buck shouldn't either.

The telegram, when it comes, is ten words long. John thinks, that can't be it. Twenty-eight years and a life in California and a penchant for awful beer and hands that could steer home a fort pierced by seventeen-hundred pieces of flak. Ten words can't account for that; not for the way Curt looked when John first kissed him, beneath a moonlit Boise sky. John will never see that look again. John will never see Curt again.

("It's alright," Curt had said, one of the last times they'd been together. He hadn't been talking about John's hands on him, but about the Buck-shaped space between their bodies that wouldn't vanish no matter how close John pressed. "I'm alright."

John had, like a fool, believed him.)

The dreams change, after that. John sees a white-hot wick of flame eating through the cockpit. Maybe it was quick; a hole in the head. One night he drives out to the airfield and presses his thumbnail into the space between his eyebrows as hard as it will go, feeling it start to pierce the skin. Pressing it even harder. Buck finds him like that on the wing of *Our Baby* and pries John's hand away. "Don't do that," he says, his own hands still warm from the Jeep he'd driven over here. "You'll hurt yourself." John turns his head; the Jeep is parked

haphazardly, not quite perpendicular to the corpse of John's bicycle on the tarmac, like Buck had jumped from the seat before the engine was all the way off. Buck licks his thumb and wipes away a bead of blood John had coaxed to the surface; he looks awful, like he hasn't been sleeping.

Smart, John thinks, through a haze of booze and pinprick pain. No dreams that way.

"Don't do that," Buck says again, quieter, squeezing then releasing John's hand. "Okay?" His eyes are bluer than the sky when John looks into them and he wonders if that's the last thing Curt ever saw. That wide open blue, split to pieces by fire and flak.

"I just wanted to know what it felt like," he explains, and Buck's gaze softens, a cloud passing over the sun.

"I know, Bucky." His hand finds a home in John's hair, fingers carding through the curls. John hates himself for how good it feels. He and Buck could be the only two people in the world out here and if John kissed him now, only the starlings would see it. "I know."

Buck helps him down from the plane and drives them both back to base, John's bicycle rattling around behind their heads. He doesn't even remember riding out here. He falls asleep watching Buck's hand work the gearshift, and dreams of Curt's skin sloughing from his body, bone by bone.

August bleeds into September and John buries the memory of Curt in his footlocker and shuts the lid up tight. The numbness that leaves him with is easy enough to drown in drink, and Buck only sometimes watches him out the corner of his eye. Most nights he's already gone to bed before John's even close to approaching drunk, which means they can both pretend: John, that everything's alright. Buck, that John's alright.

He flies another mission with Buck, loses twenty more men under his command, and only wishes he were dead once.

They tell you the odds before you get here, he writes Lou, as sober as he ever is in the middle of the morning which is to say: not very. *But it's all just numbers until you're really in it. And anyway, you're always thinking, it's never gonna be me. It's got to be the next guy. Only the next guy is a guy with a wife and kids and then you're the one wishing you got*

blown out of the sky. Makes it a little hard to care about anything anymore.

He turns twenty-eight on a mission day; John all but forgets until they're on the ground again and Buck finds him after the chaos of interrogation, tossing a small brown parcel his way tied with string. "Happy birthday, old man," he says quietly, but they're standing in a cluster of people and everyone's hearing might already be shot from the roar of the B-17s but they're a jealous lot, and can spot a gift a mile off. Douglass and Blakely swat him on the shoulder and Demarco cheers on Meatball in giving John a very sloppy birthday kiss. He tucks the package inside his sheepskin and doesn't get around to opening it 'til later, when it's just him and Buck in the bunks.

"It's, ah, not much," Buck says, rubbing at his jaw as John undoes the string. Unwrapping the paper reveals two packs of Lucky's, a handsome, travel-sized journal, and a folded up photograph that clearly hasn't been laid flat for some time. The creases are well-worn into the image but you can still make out John, Buck and Curt, smiling together somewhere in Idaho, eyes crinkled against the glare of the sun. John can't quite remember it being taken but he can imagine the scene well; John calling over the camera, Buck rolling his eyes but taking his toothpick from his mouth in acquiescence, Curt a head shorter than both of them and sandwiched between the way he always was in those days. None of them have their caps on. Buck's hand is lifted to shade his face.

"The journal was Curt's idea, actually," Buck says. "He said you should, ah, have a place to put your bullshit that wasn't in his ear."

John's startled by how hard he can laugh around the grief in his chest. Buck's grinning too, and sits down beside John on the bed when the laughter hiccups into something close to tears. John blinks them back before they can come and smooths his thumb over the photograph. "You don't want to keep it?"

"I've had it long enough." Buck hesitates. "And I already have a photograph. You know. Of Marge."

The shape of what he's implying sits between them. "Oh," John says, uselessly. "We weren't—"

"Bucky."

"We stopped *fucking*, if that's what you mean. You know that."

“Bucky.”

“He’s not my—my goddamn *WAVE*—”

“*John*.” Buck’s hand, over his. “I know that. I know.” John uses his free hand to press away the stubborn tears that have come to the surface again. “I just thought…” He sounds so uncharacteristically unsure of himself that John has to look up; pulls his eyes from Buck’s in the photograph to Buck sitting beside him, chewing on his lip. John takes his damp fingertips and places them on the hinge Buck’s jaw.

“If I can’t hurt myself, you can’t either,” he tells him. Buck sighs and lets go of his lip—puffy and red, but the skin’s unbroken. John drops his hand.

“I just thought,” Buck says again, “you know. Love doesn’t go away even if you break it off. Curt…” He swallows heavily; takes his gaze from John’s and casts it all about the room, the curved ceiling, the sweating window glass. “Curt loved you, Bucky. That doesn’t go away.”

Buck is there, a solid, unmoving force when John turns his body into him. He doesn’t say anything about the snot and saliva John’s surely getting on his shirt; just puts that same big hand into John’s hair and curls his fingers into the base of his neck, grounding him as surely as any landing gear. I didn’t love him, John wants to say, though he’s starting to think that might not be true. If he didn’t love Curt then why does he feel split open at just the memory of his name; if he didn’t love Curt then why does wanting Buck make the guilt eat him all the way up inside?

“I know I’m not the one you want,” Curt had told him once. John had kissed away the awful feeling of those words, had let Curt push him down on his knees the only way that seems to empty John’s head, these days. John had wanted Curt, then. But he’d wanted Buck too. He was in love with Buck; he dreamed of Buck. He never dreamed of Curt at all until he died.

Where that leaves John now he has no idea; only that Curt is dead. So maybe it doesn’t even matter anymore.

“Thanks,” John says, “for the journal.” His voice comes out thick when he pulls back from Buck, who looks at him closely, lilac shadows like thumbprints pressed beneath his blue eyes. “And the smokes.”

Buck's lips quirk. "They were my idea."

John lights one, because his hands are shaking, and he needs to give them something to do. Buck predictably declines when John offers him the pack but sits in tolerable silence while John puffs a nervous cloud of smoke around their heads.

"I'm sorry," John says after a while. "You were—he loved you too."

Buck sends him a sideways glance. "Not the same way he loved you, I hope."

"You ass." John shoves him. Buck rolls with the movement, getting to his feet and smiling softly at whatever he sees on John's face. He inclines his head.

"You coming?"

John folds the photograph back up and tucks it inside the journal. He stuffs it with the second pack of smokes beneath his pillow and reaches for Buck's offered hand.

England turns cold quicker than Manitowoc and John's almost glad Curt isn't here to see it. For a guy born in Wisconsin he sure couldn't stand the winter. "The hell you doing flying a plane thousands of feet in the goddamn air, Biddick?" John had asked him once, an early February morning in Nebraska where even John could admit the chill in the air. Curt had shot him a dirty look and sniffed a noisy wad of mucus up his nose.

"Someone's gotta bring a little class to the Air Force."

"And you think that's *you*?"

It's too early in the fall for the leaves to truly start to change yet but John can feel it coming. With the shift in season also comes a head cold round the whole bomb group, that John manages to dodge until the last week in September. Buck forces him to drink a whole pint of hot lemon water at breakfast, offering John an extra handkerchief from his pocket when John stares forlornly at his own, so thoroughly sneezed into there isn't a single dry patch. John takes it. It's one Marge has obviously embroidered, a line of lavender around the hem.

"I'm good, Bucky," Buck says when John offers it back to him. You'll

need it, he doesn't say.

The sun is peeking out stubbornly from behind gunmetal clouds and John point blank refuses to go back to bed so Buck follows him out to the airfield with a sigh. They don't go all the way to the tarmac, John veering their bikes off the road near a quiet line of trees about a mile out from base. He flops into the grass with a muttered, "perfect," and Buck rolls his eyes but joins him.

"All we need's a jump rope, right?" John says, nudging their knees together. Buck huffs out a breath that could be laughter and presses into the touch.

"Think I'm a little rusty."

"Nah, you'd pick it up again in no time."

"I don't know why you think so much of me."

"What?" John pushes up on his elbow. The angle causes his nose to drip dangerously and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Buck's closed his eyes. "Nothing. Forget about it."

"Buck."

He cracks one open. "It's nothing, John," he says. "Really."

"You're a bad liar."

"You know, you're not so hot yourself." They stare at each other, John suddenly furious—at the war, at the cottony feeling of his head, at the way Buck is looking at him like he doesn't drive John absolutely crazy with the cloudless blue of his soft, slow eyes; the perfect dip of his Cupid's bow. If John's nose wasn't completely stopped up by mucus right now he thinks he really would lean in and kiss him. Tug on the blonde curl of hair that has escaped Buck's careful coiffing, enough for it to hurt. To flash some expression across Buck's face that isn't just pity, or understanding, or all the other ways he looks at John that John doesn't deserve.

"That's not fair," he says at last. "I don't lie to you anymore." He makes himself sit all the way up, crossing his legs the way that's always felt this side of awkward since he grew six inches the summer he turned fourteen. He feels huge, awkward and uncomfortable next

to Buck like this, whose pants have ridden up at the ankles to show how slim they are. John could probably wrap his whole hand around them and almost touch his thumb to his finger. He feels drunk, though he hasn't touched the stuff all day.

Buck sits up, slowly, to join him. "I know," he says. "I'm sorry, I—I guess I'm not used to it."

"Yeah, well. Join the club."

Buck doesn't cross his legs. He draws his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around them, looking somewhere in the vicinity over John's shoulder, and says, "how did it feel? With Curt?"

"Uh." John fumbles for Marge's handkerchief and blows his nose. "Why? You curious?" he jokes, realising his misstep less than a second later when Buck's shoulders draw up around his ears. "Um. I mean. It felt—good?"

"Yeah, okay, John."

"No, I…" John scrambles. How do you put it, in a way that Buck would understand? "It felt like… he could hold me up, you know? I mean, I trusted him with my life every time we went up into the air, and he felt the same. It made it…" He chews on his lip. "Steady, I guess. And, um, I mean. You know how it feels with Marge. It's good like that, Buck, it's… when you want it that bad, it's always good."

John was taller than Curt by a head but Curt's hands were bigger than his. He doesn't know how many men, exactly, he's been with. It's not something John ever felt like he had to count. In a way they all feel the same—a steady wall of height and muscle you can lean into and not worry it's gonna give way. He slept with one guy in college who used so much pomade they could've doubled it as lube. Matthew used to wear this godawful cologne and the first boy John ever kissed tasted like communion wine. Curt had strong shoulders. His knees were knobbly. When he and John both shut up long enough to kiss and be kissed it wasn't some inevitable topple into bed; or, in their case, into a dark corner behind the shower block. There was always a push-pull. John liked it when Curt laughed against him and Curt liked it when John bit his lip. Nothing much really changed between them when they went from friends into something more. Only John now knew the way Curt tasted, and Curt had learned how to take him apart with just those hands.

But what can he say to Buck about that? Buck, who hasn't said

anything. Who's still staring over John's shoulder, at something or someone that isn't there.

"Buck? You… *have*, with Marge, right?"

"Hm?" Buck starts. His eyes meet John's. "Yeah, we—yeah."

"Alright. Then it's like that."

"It's—really not that different? With a—"

"Not for me," John says simply. He wipes at his nose again. "Why, uh. Why you askin', Buck?"

"I'm not—" The aborted sentence seems to choke up in Buck's throat. He clears it, releasing one of his arms to tear up handfuls of grass. "I'm not perfect, Bucky. I'm not a—saint."

"Who said you were?"

"Are you kidding?" Buck looks at him again. "You say I am. Every fucking day. I'm—One Engine Cleven, I don't drink, I don't smoke—"

"Buck," John laughs. "You *are* all those things."

"What if I don't want to be?"

John stares at him. He can't quite pinpoint the second this conversation turned upside-down but he thinks this might just be the most important moment of his life, and he can't even breathe through his nose for it. "What do you want to be, Buck?" he asks quietly, and Buck is looking at him, and John's nose is dripping, and Curt is five weeks dead, and they might both be dead tomorrow too. John's kissed people under worse circumstances, but the minute he shifts forward in the grass, his hand moving somewhere near his knee, Buck's eyes shoot down right to it and his face closes up so fast John barely sees it happen.

He looks down. In his hand, in the grass, is scrunched Marge's handkerchief, lavender hemline catching the sun.

The disappointment, when it comes, is as familiar to John as whiskey; as the roar of a B-17. "I think I need a lie down," he says quietly. "I'm gonna head back."

Buck nods wordlessly. Doesn't say, "you can't lie down here?" Like he might've, before. Like Curt would've. Curt had asked John, the night

they broke it off: “You really think he’ll come round?”

John’s not sure what he thought then. But he has his answer now.

In his dream, Buck doesn’t pull away.

He tastes like mint and coffee. His hand curls arounds John’s jaw and tugs him in close, closer, kissing John like he’s trying to slip some part of himself beneath the salt-slick sweat of his skin. John’s hand finds that errant curl and twists it around his finger. Buck groans against his mouth when John pulls on it, his other hand flying up to cradle John’s waist, and then they’re falling backwards in the grass and every inch of Buck’s body is covered with an inch of John’s. Their knees knock together. John kicks off his shoes and presses his socked foot to the delicate bone of Buck’s ankle. He can hear his heart beating in his eardrum and it sounds like Billie Holiday. Buck’s hands fumble with the buttons on John’s shirt and he lifts himself up enough to help, popping the last two free. In the way dreams go Buck’s shirt is already gone. He’s in only his skivvies, and his skin is warm from the sun and the heat of John’s palms. John tugs the collar of his undershirt down to mouth a sloppy kiss on the jut of bone beneath and Buck bucks his hips so strongly into John’s he can feel the hard line of his cock against his thigh. He blinks and has his hand around it, already sticky with pre-come. Buck is gasping into his mouth, rocking into John’s shaky grip. Buck is choking. Spittle bubbles from his lips and John looks down and flak has blown open Buck’s whole torso and John’s hand is covered in blood. He looks up and Buck is Curt.

“I know I’m not the one you want,” Curt says, a bullet blossoming a hole through his brain. The only thing in John’s pocket to mop it up is Marge’s handkerchief; when he pulls it out the lavender writhes clean off the hem and chokes John in its sweetness, until he wakes, sweaty, gasping, clutching at the knives in his throat.

They tread so carefully around one another the whole base knows by morning. It feels almost like it did back at Kelly Field, when John first told Buck how he felt and they didn’t speak all summer. No one brings it up, except for a series of pointed looks from Jack, which John steadfastly ignores the same way he ignores Meatball begging for bacon in the mess. “You’re cold, man,” Demarco says with a shake of his head, feeding Meatball all four corners of his toast under the table.

John scoffs and chugs the cold dregs of his coffee.

“You’re spoiling him.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

Buck meets his gaze over the table. John feels his own skitter, a belly landing on grass. “What happens when you get shot down?”

“Jesus, Bucky.” Demarco covers Meatball’s ears, like he might’ve actually understood John’s words. “Don’t jinx it for the rest of us.”

John scrapes back his chair to stand. “It’s not a jinx if it’s true.”

He gets a letter from Lou, who responds to the self-pitying drivel he’d sent her with a rare display of sincerity. She writes how sorry she is about Curt; John doesn’t even remember telling her. *He was a good man beneath all that bluster and so are you. You may not have a wife or kids but you have people who’d care if you got blown up, John, so don’t you forget that. Ruthie’s never even met you and she says she’d care a whole lot. Wherever you are in your head, get out of it. Make it so that you’ll come home.*

He writes her back something he can barely look at, and not just because he pens it in the dark. *I took a chance. Didn’t work out.*

Who was I kidding to think otherwise?

He fills in as Air Exec when Jack comes down with the company cold, and buries himself so deep in paperwork he only sees Buck in the bunks before bed. “Thought you didn’t like all this stuff,” Harding comments, sitting across from John at a desk that’s all but invisible beneath teetering piles of requisition forms.

“Passes the time,” John tells him, and nods in acceptance when Harding tips his flask toward John’s cup of joe. By the time October rolls around the kiss-that-wasn’t is a distant memory that John’s shut up alongside Curt. He’s been practising what he’ll say to Marge if he ever sees her again: *Looked after him, no trouble. You’d barely even know there was a war on.*

So of course it’s a late Saturday afternoon that he and Buck wind up alone in the shower block again. There’s none of the careful quietness of the last time they were here together, John holding a trembling icepack to Buck’s red and puffy lip. The silence is instead taut between them, and John jerks the water off harder than he should in a way he

knows will ruin the plumbing. He doesn't care. He wraps a towel round his waist and exits the cubicle just as Buck takes a hesitant step forward, fresh clothes folded carefully in his arms. "Hot water's still good," John tells him. "I don't know for how long."

"Thanks, Bucky."

Buck is standing between John and his own clothes, tossed haphazardly on the bench by the door. He's looking at John, brow furrowed, like John's a math problem Buck's gotta solve. The thing of it is, as much as it hurts, John always wants Buck looking at him. In any way. In every way.

"Listen," John begins, just as Buck says, "John, I—"

They break off at the same time, awkward laughter echoing across the tiled floor. John shakes his head; motions for Buck to continue. He drifts a hand down to his towel to hold it in place and Buck swallows. "I shouldn't have asked all that," he says. "About Curt. It's your business and I… don't know what I was thinking."

"Yeah, well." John's sure they're alone, but he tosses a quick glance over his shoulder just in case. "I shouldn't've tried to kiss you."

"It's not like I…" Buck's hands spasm around the clothes in his grip, creasing them. "Not like I gave you no reason to." He keeps his eyes, resolute, on John's chin or higher. John suddenly feels the rivulets of water still running down his naked chest; the coldness of his dog tags against his skin and the crucifix strung beside them.

He takes a step.

"But you changed your mind."

Buck's throat works. John watches Buck watch him catch the movement; sees the way his eyes dip down to the pool of John's collarbone then back up again. "It's not that simple."

"Because of Marge?"

"Because of—a lot of things, Bucky. A goddamn war, comes to mind." He reaches one hand out and nudges John's when it's curled at his hip. "Curt."

John tangles their fingers together before Buck can pull away. His head feels cottony again but this time it isn't from a cold. They would

be insane, to do this here, but every other day they climb into a cockpit with a fifty-fifty chance of coming back out again, and neither one of them tries to move. “War’s in France,” John murmurs. “England’s mighty nice this time of year.”

Buck’s eyes are pale pools of light. They’re the moon, reflecting on water. John leans in, second time’s the charm, and Buck stops him with a hand on his chest, still piled high with his freshly laundered uniform. You can take the boy out of small-town Wyoming, John thinks nonsensically, but you can’t take Wyoming out of the boy. “And Curt?”

“*Don’t*,” John says. The word comes out without even meaning to. Don’t make me think about him, he doesn’t say. Don’t, or I’m afraid I’ll split apart.

“Alright.” Buck’s reply is soft as he untangles his hand from John’s. The same kind of voice you’d use to calm a startled filly. “Then I won’t.” He steps back and hits a shower cubicle, which only Gale Cleven could make look cool. Twin blue moons stare across at John, as far away as the waxing crescent in the sky, until the door to the shower block rattles open and Buck looks away.

London is Buck’s idea. He brings it up at the party for Dye’s 25th, where he’s been a sober shadow at John’s elbow all night, so much so that every fresh face they meet says, “Major Egan, Major Cleven,” like it’s laughable that either one of them would ever be alone. Buck’s in a good mood—even cracks a smile at John’s baseball joke, which is John’s cue to make it twice, much to Crank’s poorly disguised chagrin. They haven’t talked about what happened in the showers but John’s just thankful they’re talking at all. Above everything else, Buck is his friend. As long as that’s all Buck wants, John will take it with two hands, and lock away his desperate want in the same place as his grief over Curt—both feelings too big to know what to do with.

Doesn’t mean he can’t drink himself stupid over it. The whiskey loosens his tongue enough that he gets into it with the colonel, Buck’s eyes on him all the while. John knows Harding won’t actually do anything, but the silence after he accuses him of being flak happy—after he smacks his lapel, which John admits may have been one step too far—is still strung with tension.

“Jesus, John,” Buck says under his breath, as the colonel and most of

the guys walk away. “You need a break. I think the colonel ought to fix you up a weekend pass.”

If Demarco wasn’t standing right behind them, maybe John would ask. *Why, Buck—because I keep thinking about kissing you and you won’t follow through? Because this place is filled with ghosts and they’re all I can think about when it goes quiet in my head?*

Because I might’ve loved Curt, and I definitely love you, and that’s no way to win a war?

“Mm,” he says instead. Demarco’s probably not listening, but for all his bluster John’s had a lifetime of learning how to be discreet. He turns to look at Buck, who isn’t quite staring his way but somewhere in that middle distance again. Like he’s right there, but a million miles away for all you can reach him. John tries anyway. “You should come. London. Let’s do it up, Buck, paint the town red.”

The silence after John’s words tells him all he needs to know. “Yeah,” Buck draws out, tone in his voice letting John down even before he can say it—or maybe it’s the way he pushes away from the bar, leaving John alone for the first time all night. “Maybe next time. Come here, Meatball.”

Gale Cleven is not a good liar, but he tells half-truths all the time. A skill he picked up from his father, maybe, who John would love to meet one day outside Casper’s seediest gaming parlour, and beat the living daylights from. Watching him, John feels as though a pane of glass has split the space between them. Even if he wanted to, he’s not sure he could break through. “I’m telling Marge, Buck,” he says instead, lingering at the bar even as the band starts to play his song. Buck spins, Meatball cradled in his arms, and winks at John’s empty threat as he dances away.

London is Buck’s idea, but in the end John goes alone.

He almost changes his mind, is the thing.

John wakes early the day of his departure when Buck’s shaken awake in the bed next to him. “I should be going with you,” John says as they dress together, but Buck’s already shaking his head before the sentence is even all the way out, lacing up his boots without looking at John.

“You got a train to catch, Bucky,” he says, and in the early morning darkness with the other guys tripping over footlockers and groaning around them, it’s all John knows he *can* say. This is the first time they’ve been apart since John came over to England, and he doesn’t know why he didn’t think of that when he asked Harding for the pass. His heart feels like it’s going ballistic but Buck’s voice when he speaks again is steady as ever. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

Don’t count on it hangs in the air between them—for once, John doesn’t say it out loud.

He tries to sleep on the way to London but his mind’s halfway to Bremen with Buck. There’s a boy in his carriage who keeps shooting looks at John, like he wants to creep down the aisle while his mother dozes and fire off a million questions about the war his father’s probably died in. Any other day John would shoot him a wink, unpin the oak leaves from his lapel so the kid could turn them over in his hands. Scrounge around in his pack for the chocolate bar he knows is stashed somewhere, and make the boy promise to share it with his mom.

Today, John turns away and closes his eyes. He rests his head against the shuddering window glass, thankful for the pain it jostles through his skull and down his spine, and almost wishes for the train to crash. Buck would be in Germany by now. John digs his fingernails into the meat of his palm and prays until he almost draws blood.

John hasn’t been to London before, but with the war on the streets are sombre. He checks into his hotel around three, a nicer place than anywhere he stayed at before the war—or maybe John’s just forgotten what creature comforts are like. The mattress is heavenly, the sheets a crisp white—he spends longer than he would care to admit rubbing the cotton between his fingertips, imagining it parachute silk. There’s a window that takes up a large swathe of the wall opposite. John stands so close his nose is almost pressed to the glass, watching the sky like somehow he’ll see Buck from this far away. London is spread out below like a patchwork quilt of smoke and stone, and John thinks, if anything, it’ll make a decent letter home.

Lately, he hasn’t really known what to say.

He’s not the only GI at the hotel, and John slips from the lobby before one particularly nervous-looking officer can corner him into stilted conversation. The sky came over grey while John was on the train, and since he checked in the wind’s whipped up. He stuffs his hands in

his pockets, wishing for his sheepskin and not thinking about Curt in the cold, as he lets his feet take him down roads he doesn't know the name of. In a paper shop that's about to close, John finds and buys a series of postcards, more than he has people to send them to. Trafalgar Square, for his mom. Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey for his sisters, and a view of Hyde Park for Lou. The rest he thinks idly about giving to Buck on his return, to send to Marge and his pals from college, who for some reason or another Buck tries to keep up with. John's been out of college longer than Buck but even if that weren't the case, he can't imagine writing anyone from that time in his life. Not sure they'd recognise him if he did. Even Matthew, who had John's cock in his mouth the last time they saw each other during John's leave to Minnesota—well. They never were the writing type, even before Matthew married Joanne.

He tucks the cards into his breast pocket and keeps walking until the landscape turns familiar again. He stops and lights a cigarette on a dusky street corner as the last vestiges of what passes for sunlight in London creep below the city's horizon.

"You stand out here much longer, they'll fine you for light discipline."

The voice belongs to a woman, who detaches herself from the shadows behind John and leans in close to light her own cigarette from his. She's bundled in a coat but her face is free of coverings, and John takes a moment to appreciate the pale grey pools of her eyes before she draws away again. "Come," she says, the word accented in a way John doesn't recognise. "I know a place."

He follows her down three more streets and a side alley until they reach a small but well-lit restaurant. "Café Warsaw?" he reads out loud. She turns to face him, smiling around her cigarette. It's not a Lucky Strike; John thinks it might be a menthol. "You're Polish?"

"I'm Paulina," she corrects. "Come. They do gołąbki. Almost as good as it is in Warsaw." John grounds his cigarette out against the brickwork and trails her inside.

Paulina does the ordering, before she's even shrugged out of her coat. John offers to take it but she simply raises an eyebrow and dumps it on the chair beside her. Her eyes are even paler in the restaurant light. She's blonde, like Marge, but instead of the long warmth of Marge's perfect curls, Paulina's are icy and short, brushing her shoulders. One side of her hair is swept behind her ear and the other swings forward as she talks from a mouth that's as pink a Cupid's bow as Buck's,

though Paulina's lips are red from lipstick, not bitten worry.

John knows where this is going. Where he wants to want it to go—to a darkened corner of the restaurant, an alleyway between here and his hotel, into his bed with the parachute-silk sheets and the wide open sky of London across from them. Paulina seems interested—would she have led John here if she wasn't?—but John tries to summon some semblance of feeling that isn't grief, or numbness, or guilt, and comes up against a blankness that threatens to swallow him whole. He drinks more vodka. He kisses her with the taste of gołąbki in his mouth. She tells him about her dead husband and John's almost drunk enough to tell her about Curt. *I knew a pilot in a potato field, too*, he wants to say. *I'm so scared to death I'll know another*.

He does fuck her in the end, in the hotel they make their way back to. Her body is soft in John's hands and even before they get their clothes off she is wet and wanting against him, kissing hungry and open-mouthed down the column of his throat while John lies beneath her and counts the water stains in the ceiling that look like constellations. They have sex on the mattress John decides is too soft for him, and again in the chair by the window as the Germans bomb the shit out of London. "The closer you are to death, the more alive you feel," she whispers against him, and John wonders, closing his eyes, gripping Paulina's hips hard enough to bruise as she rides him with a desperation haunted by grief, if that means he'll live forever.

In the morning after Paulina leaves, John takes his crucifix off and lets the chain fall through his fingers like water. He's not sure why he's been wearing it so long. Curt had been wearing a crucifix when he died, and look where that got him.

"Jesus," Curt had said, the first time he'd gone down on John in the middle of nowhere, Idaho, both of them so startlingly sober every touch of Curt's fingers to him was a live wire. "Last time I was on my knees I was prayin'."

"You pray a lot?" John had asked, even as he threaded his fingers through the dark hair atop Curt's head.

He'd looked up at John through his lashes—smiling, always smiling, that was the way John tried to remember him but he'd dreamed of blood for so long—and answered, "I'm a good Catholic boy. Aren't you?"

John leaves the crucifix on the nightstand. He skips the hotel breakfast

to buy this morning's paper, and wishes his train had crashed after all.

He forgets the postcards are in his pocket.

John sits at the foot of what used to be Buck's bed. His locker is open, neatly stacked piles of socks and books and letters from Marge, all of them carefully refolded and slid back inside their envelopes. Buck had told him once that Marge kissed the seal before she sent each one. He'd looked stricken after he said it, like it wasn't John he'd meant to tell, but John had mustered every inch of ice in his heart and told Buck that was, "mighty fine of her." He had tried to mean it so badly it hurt.

From his trouser pocket John draws out Marge's handkerchief, the one stitched with lavender that John never got around to returning after he washed it. He folds it now into the corner of the locker; then, remembering, finds the cards in the buttoned-up pocket at his breast.

He won't send them now. There's no one here or at home who wants to hear what he has to say. John leans down to pick up one of Buck's books to slot the postcards inside the cover, only when he tips it open, something else flutters out.

It's John's lucky deuce, two corners bitten off, the one he'd thought Buck kept with him every mission—left behind. An afterthought. Another thing of John's he gave without asking, that Buck never wanted in the first place.

He closes his eyes. All he can see behind them is the corpse of a B-17, rent in half, her engines on fire. Not even Buck could fly her out of that. Croz had told him, so carefully, like he thought John might break apart at the words, that they hadn't seen any chutes. "You know that doesn't mean anything," he'd added, when John wished for the crucifix back around his neck so the weight of it could choke him. Buck had gone down last night. Before he'd fucked Paulina; before he ever even met her. Was Buck already dead, when John closed his eyes for the briefest of moments and imagined it was him on top of him? Paulina was blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and behind the vodka she tasted like peppermint. From her menthols, not from Buck's gum—but John was desperate enough, deluded enough, sick enough, cruel enough, to not care about the difference. He wishes, now, he had—if only so his last memory of Buck isn't an imagined one.

When he's sure the tears won't come, John blinks his eyes back open.

He picks the deuce up off the floor and turns it over in his hands. Silly, really, to think it could've saved Buck, when John's been his bad luck all along.

He drops the note back inside the footlocker and looks down at the pages it fell from.

Shake hands, we shall never be friends, all's over;
I only vex you the more I try.
All's wrong that ever I've done or said,
And nought to help it in this dull head:
Shake hands, here's luck, good-bye.

But if you come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
Be good to the lad that loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you,
And whistle and I'll be there.

End Notes

- since publishing the last installment in this series I realised Curt's mother actually died before he did, so John's letter so her would never have happened. My fic, my rules, and in this universe Mrs Biddick lives. Just in case anyone was wondering!
- Demarco just chilling at the bar while the buckies have their incredibly homoerotic conversation is from this post (it's canon in the show; I just hadn't noticed it til now).
- The show loves to mess with a timeline! From Don Miller's book: "On the morning of October 8, 1943, an hour or so before Johnny Egan stepped on the train that brought him to London on his first leave from Thorpe Abbotts, Buck Cleven took off for Bremen and didn't return. Three Luftwaffe fighters flew out of the sun and tore into his Fortress, knocking out three engines, blowing holes in the tail and nose, sheering off a good part of the left wing, and setting the cockpit on fire. The situation hopeless, Cleven ordered the crew to jump. He was the last man out of the plane. When he jumped, the bomber was only about 2,000 feet from the ground. This was at 3:15 P.M., about the time Johnny Egan would have been checking into his London hotel." (pp. 9-10, Ebury Press 2024 edition)
- thank you to this post for the canonical gay poetry Buck has in his footlocker. The quoted poem is by A.E. Housman which you can read again here.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!